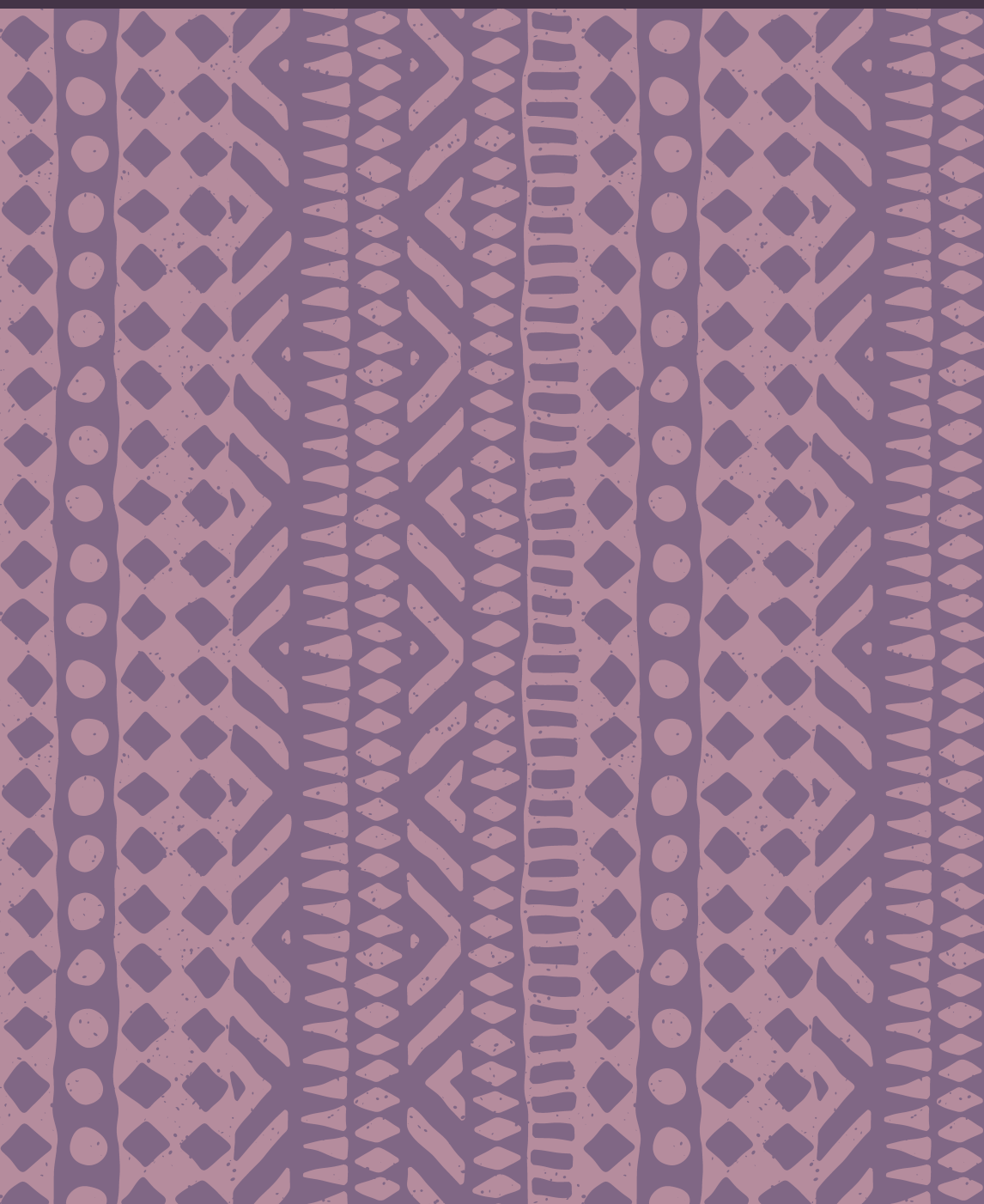


Thoughts on the Meaning and Use of Pre-Hispanic Mexican Sellos

Frederick Field



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Pre-Hispanic Mexican Sellos**

BY

FREDERICK V. FIELD

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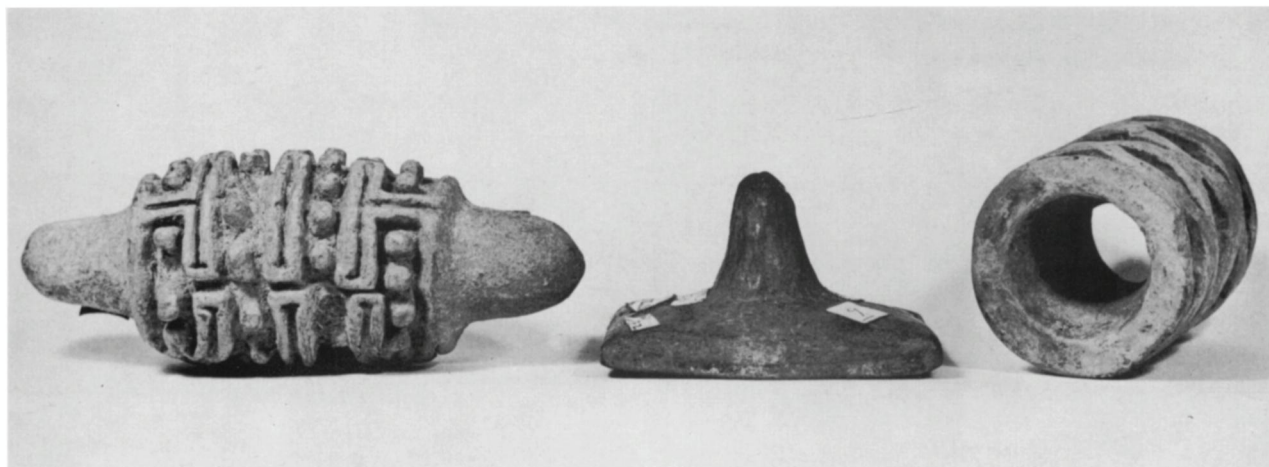
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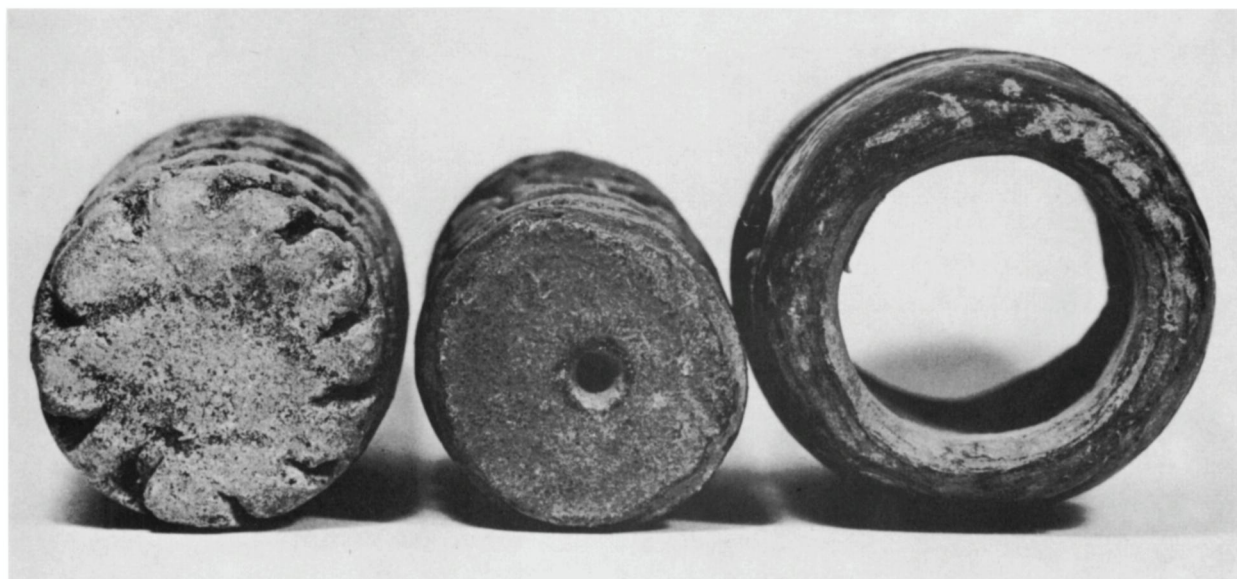
The impressions used to illustrate this paper are made directly from the sellos themselves; they are neither rubbings nor drawings made from rubbings. The technique of making these direct impressions was worked out after much experimentation by Gillett G. Griffin, Curator of Pre-Columbian and Primitive Art at Princeton University. Griffin and I spent many hours and days working together handling most of the collection. During this time, his part of our casual conversation contributed many stimulating ideas regarding the meaning and usage of sellos. I am deeply indebted to him.

For giving encouragement to this study and/or for valuable suggestions as the writing was in progress I want to thank especially: Miss Elizabeth Benson, Curator for the Pre-Columbian Collection at Dumbarton Oaks and editor of the series in which this paper appears; Dr. Junius Bird, Curator of South American Archaeology at the American Museum of Natural History; Dr. Michael D. Coe of Yale University; Dr. Frederick J. Dockstader, Director of the Museum of the American Indian; Mr. Franz Feuchtwanger, a wise student of the archaic cultures of Mexico and especially Tlatilco; Sr. José Luis Franco, erudite Mexican scholar; Mr. Carlo T. E. Gay, who through his carefully prepared publications is gradually adding to our knowledge of little-known Guerrero; Dr. Angel González, formerly of Mexico and now at the University of Pittsburgh; Miss Julie Jones, Assistant Curator at the Museum of Primitive Art; Archaeologist José Luis Lorenzo, formerly in charge of Pre-Hispanic Monuments for the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia; Mr. George W. Pepper, a thoughtful collector; and Archaeologist Román Piña Chan of the Museo Nacional de Antropología. None of these has the slightest responsibility for anything in this paper with which the reader may disagree; they all have my thanks for anything that passes inspection.

Frederick V. Field
Mexico, D.F.



(Left) Rolling pin sello from Las Bocas. 13.5 x 17.6 cm. rolled. (Center) Flat sello from Remojadas. 8 x 5.4 cm. (Right) Hollow cylindrical sello from Las Bocas. 7 x 16.8 cm. rolled.



Three types of cylindrical sellos. (Left) From Western Mexico. 8.5 x 15.3 cm. rolled. (Center) From Western Mexico. 7.5 x 13.5 cm. rolled. (Right) From Tlatilco. 7.2 x 19.3 cm. rolled.

Thoughts on the Meaning and Use of Pre-Hispanic Mexican Sellos

Sellos are objects fashioned almost always from clay and incised with simple to elaborate designs; they are made for the purpose of imprinting that design upon some other surface.¹ Their form is either cylindrical or flat; the flat form has a handle on the side opposite the design. Pigment was applied to the sello which was in turn printed on a surface; traces of red pigment are found on a large number of them. Cylindrical sellos predominated in the earlier centuries, flat ones in the later. But while flat sellos appear along with cylindrical ones in the Middle Pre-Classic Period, the latter seem to disappear around the beginning of the Classic Period.²

Among the more than two thousand sellos in my collection, there are only six made of stone. One of these is a copy, as exact as it could be fashioned, of an elaborately incised clay cylinder from Oaxaca. The clay original is far superior in terms of clarity and definition and much better suited to impressing its form upon some object; it was probably for this reason, and the relative ease of sculpting it, that clay was generally used as the medium for sellos. Three of the stone sellos, however, two complete and one a fragment,

¹ I shall use the word "sello" in preference to "stamp" or "seal" throughout this paper. For one thing, sello is the word commonly used in Mexico to describe these objects, and it has an unmistakable and widely recognized meaning. For another, I find the words "stamp" and "seal" equivocal; both are used to describe things that are not sellos. Seal, particularly, has a functional connotation, which I find misleading with reference to Pre-Hispanic sellos.

² The chronology of Pre-Hispanic Mexico is constantly changing as new evidence comes to light. In this paper I am employing the chronology in current use in the exhibits at the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico. However, in checking these dates with the museum authorities in the latter part of September, I was informed that there would likely be further revisions made in the light of excavations now under way by Michael D. Coe in San Lorenzo, an Olmec site. I have no doubt that these revisions will lengthen the time span. My use of such terms as Pre-Classic, Classic, and Post-Classic refers to the sequence on the left. An alternative dating commonly used by American archaeologists is on the right:

Pre-Classic	Early	1700-1300 B.C.		Pre-Classic	Early	1500-800 B.C.
	Middle	1300-800 B.C.			Middle	800-300 B.C.
	Late	800-100 B.C.			Late	300 B.C.-150 A.D.
				Proto-Classic		150-300 A.D.
Classic		100 B.C.-900 A.D.		Classic		300-900 A.D.
Post-Classic	Early	900-1250 A.D.		Post-Classic	Early	900-1200 A.D.
	Late	1250-1521 A.D.			Late	1200-1521 A.D.

are large, heavy, oblong stone blocks (the two complete ones measure 44 x 16.5 x 11 centimeters and 27.5 x 15.8 x 8 centimeters) with the design completely covering one of the larger flat surfaces (Fig. 1). A plausible use of such objects would have been to lay a moistened section of bark paper over the previously pigmented stone surface, beat on it, and then draw it off with the design stamped upon it.

The cylindrical sellos are usually hollow so that a stick can be placed lengthwise inside to roll them out on the pigment and then upon the object to be stamped. A frequent variation, especially among Tlatilco and Las Bocas sellos, gives the appearance of a rolling pin, with handles tapering off both ends of the cylindrical barrel. Another variation, found frequently in Western Mexico, is a solid cylinder truncated at both ends, without handles, or with a hole through the cylinder so small that a stick cannot be inserted. The design made by a cylinder sello rolled out once measures anywhere from 5.5 to 36 centimeters.

The flat sellos have oblong, round, square, or irregularly shaped surfaces. Their handles are either pinched out on the side opposite the design, or, as in the case of the El Chanal group, in the form of a flatiron handle (Fig. 2). The longer dimension of a flat sello varies from 1.7 to 25 centimeters.

One can say in general that sellos were used throughout the Pre-Hispanic Period, from before 1000 B.C. onward, though further investigation may reveal important geographical and lengthy historical gaps. Present evidence suggests that sellos had their maximum use in certain, though not all, Pre-Classic cultures, that their incidence diminished and in certain areas may have disappeared during the Classic Horizon, and that there was a resurgence in the centuries before the Conquest.

It appears that sellos were developed in the Early Pre-Classic (before 1300 B.C.) in the central Mexican highlands, so that by about 1000 B.C. they were an important factor in several cultural centers in the Valley of Mexico and Puebla. The tradition extended later to Gulf Coast areas, to Michoacán, Jalisco, Colima, and Guerrero in the West, and throughout much of southern Mesoamerica. The chronological sequence, however, must remain vague until far more data have been gathered from the field and far more study has been devoted to the evolution of styles and motifs.

Sellos appear to have played an important role in certain Olmec or Olmec-influenced centers, such as Tlatilco, Las Bocas, and Remojadas, and a minor one in others, such as La Venta, San Lorenzo, or Chalcatzingo. They have been found in some quantity in Teotihuacán but seem to have been scarce in Monte Albán and the great Classic Maya sites, where those that have been found seem to have been redeposited Pre-Classic material. It might be that in the latter areas sellos were sometimes made of perishable material like wood, although wood would have been a very difficult material with which to work. Perhaps for some reason sellos were less used in those cultures. The Post-Classic renaissance of the sello is evidenced by large numbers found in an important center in Guerrero, in a Colima site, and in recent excavations in the Federal District.

Michoacán and Colima have produced an abundance of sellos. Some come from a Late Pre-Classic site on the border of Michoacán and Guanajuato called Chupícuaro,

better known for its charmingly fashioned figurines, and others from El Chanal, Colima, a Post-Classic site of nearly two millennia later which is located approximately twelve miles north of the city of Colima and a very short distance from the Colima volcano. Many other sellos, not accounted for by these sites, are difficult to place chronologically, first, because of the general absence of data on sellos, and, second, because of the present inadequate amount of scientific investigation in Western Mexico.

Sello designs are of great variety. A representative selection of the flora and fauna of Mexico is depicted, the style ranging from realistic to abstract. What appear to be concepts of the firmament, of the world directions, of the moon and the sun, of rain and lightning, of water and earth, of clouds and smoke, are represented pictorially or symbolically. Human beings with animal attributes, animals with human attributes, human figures clad in secular or ceremonial garb, hands, feet, disembodied limbs, and several kinds of serpent motifs are among the subjects represented. It is probable that, abstract as some of the designs appear to be, none is purely geometric or decorative; rather, even the most abstract is derived from some real or symbolic meaning.

Unfortunately very little attention has been given sellos and very few examples can be seen in either public or private collections. In the magnificent Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico there are not more than a handful of sellos on exhibit. References in books or monographs on archaeology, whether by Mexican or foreign authors, give scant, if any, attention to sellos. In excavation reports, sellos are usually listed at the bottom of a list or chart of miscellaneous artifacts, or are illustrated as one item on a page of miscellaneous clay objects.

Maurice Ries (1932) considered sellos, both flat and cylindrical, molds of clay and basket work, wooden paddle stamps, and roulette stamps in relation to a movable-type form of printing in the Americas. Although the article suggests a study of sellos, the references to them are scattered and confused and based on a handful of examples actually seen by the author and upon quotations from others. Ries quotes several authors as saying that sellos were used for body decoration. Other quotations refer to the use of sellos in stamping pottery and textiles. The author himself recognizes in the foreword that "this discussion of stamps and seals of the western hemisphere is thoroughly elementary."

Jorge Enciso (1947) includes 766 drawings of sello designs organized rather loosely under broad categories: geometric motifs, natural forms, fauna, the human body, and artificial forms. This study only scratches the surface of meaning and usage, and does not deal with chronological trends nor with cultural and regional characteristics. It serves, nevertheless, as an invaluable collection of drawings.

Nearly ten years ago while digging earth to reinforce a railway embankment in the region of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Veracruz, a large pot was found containing 73 flat sellos and 41 cylindrical ones. From rubbings of these sellos finished drawings were made, which were then elegantly reproduced on cloth and published by Guillermo M. Echániz in an edition of only twenty-five copies for the collector Gaspar Mayagoitia Barragán. Echániz in a prefatory note says that the style of the sellos corresponds to the culture known as "Remojadas Inferior, whose age according to carbon-14 dating is about 2000 B.C." He

adds: "We know thousands of Pre-Hispanic sellos of various periods and cultures, but we have not seen paper, nor cloth, nor a single piece of hide with the impression of these sellos." This little-known group of sellos is among the finest ever found, but to me it is very questionable that it belongs to the culture stated. The extremely early dating of 2000 B.C. is way out of line; it more likely belongs to the late Pre-Classic or early Classic, that is, to the century or two before the beginning of the Christian Era. Constantine Rábago, who did the drawings, writes in a postscript to the published collection that the function of sellos is unknown today, although he supposes that they were used in ceremonial rituals and perhaps to mark chronological events. In support of this notion he points out both the profusion of zoomorphic figures "in which . . . chronological signs predominate" and the scarcity of human and phytomorphic depictions in this group of 114 sellos.

These investigations should have opened up the subject for further research. Unfortunately, no one has seriously taken up the challenge. Important studies of sellos by José Luis Franco of Mexico remain unpublished.

We have available, then, no body of data, no systematic analysis, nor classification—to say nothing of interpretation—upon which to base a study. This is surprising, for with sellos we are dealing with one of the principal sources for the study of Pre-Hispanic design, mythology, and symbolism and with the exclusive form of Pre-Hispanic printing. Our ignorance is so abysmal that we do not even know for what purpose these objects were used.

The Use of Sellos

There has come down to us virtually no evidence of the use of sellos. No textiles whatsoever exist that can be said to have been printed by sellos. The examples of clay, if any, actually stamped by sellos are so rare as to be the exception. If human beings were decorated by them they are not around to demonstrate the fact, and their clay images furnish far more negative than positive testimony.

Nevertheless, archaeologists permit themselves broad assumptions and even flat assertions on the use of sellos. Until recently the description adjoining a Pre-Classic display case containing a few sellos in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico read in part: "They had the custom of painting their bodies and faces with stamps." That was certainly an unequivocal statement. In a rearrangement of the display that sign has now been replaced by one which reads: ". . . what the people of those times were like, how they dressed and adorned themselves. . . ." In other words, the sellos are still associated with body adornment.

George C. Vaillant (1931:296) records the finding of two sellos on the site at Ticomán and comments that they "must have been used for decorating skins or textiles." Paul Westheim (1950:130) says: "The seal . . . was a kind of printing by which the design was imprinted on the skin, probably as a substitute for tattooing." Enciso (1947) states: "The stamping process was frequently used to decorate pottery. . . . Skin, cloth

or paper were printed by applying a previously inked stamp." M. D. Coe (1965:54) writes: "The principal, and perhaps only use of such stamps must have been to apply pigments . . . to the skin."³

I. W. Johnson (1959:463-4) makes the following statement (the only reference to sellos, aside from unidentified marginal drawings, in the two volumes of *Esplendor del México Antiguo*): "These objects were used to stamp designs on vases and human bodies; it seems certain that they were also used to print designs on cotton cloth and pounded-bark clothing. The decorations consist of geometrical, naturalistic, and conventionalized motifs." In other words, according to this source, while it only "seems certain" that sellos were used to decorate fabrics, there is no doubt about their use on pots and human bodies.

José Alcina Franch (1958) must be mentioned, not for the quality of the contribution but rather because it is the only book I know which is entirely devoted to an investigation of the meaning and use of sellos. Alcina Franch, a Spanish scholar, visited the Canary Islands, where he became interested in the local seals, and set out to investigate possible relations between Euro-African stamps and those of the American continent. The "evidence" supporting the notion need not be repeated, but it should be reported that the principal thesis which emerges from the book is that "toward the first half of the first millennium before Christ, one can determine cultural contacts between the Mediterranean area and northern Africa and the central part of the Americas. . . ." (31-2)

Alcina Franch's study of the Pre-Hispanic sellos themselves was undertaken at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris and later at the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico. During the course of his work he claims to have seen some eight- or nine-hundred sellos, but from the numerous illustrations in the text these seem to have been exclusively flat sellos from the Post-Classic Period. His conclusions with respect to these are: first, that the principal purpose of these objects was to decorate the human skin with paint, possibly for ceremonial or religious occasions; second, that they could also have been used, although he does not find sufficient proof to say so confidently, to stamp designs on textiles; and, third, that sellos were not used to stamp pottery, though similar instruments, presumably molds, which are infrequently found, were so used.

Alcina Franch points out that in general Spanish sources treating the subject are in agreement that the Pre-Hispanic people decorated their bodies with designs of various colors. "But if," he continues, "we wish to carry the concept further and determine what method was employed to apply these paintings, our intention is frustrated in the majority of cases." However, Alcina Franch is not frustrated for long; he finds a passage in Bishop Diego de Landa's famous *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán* which he believes supports the assumption that sellos were used for body decoration. If true, this is very important for it has generally been agreed that none of the early Post-Conquest chroniclers had even mentioned sellos. Indeed, their failure to have mentioned them is one of the many problems that an investigator of sellos has to face. Alcina Franch's "discovery," then, must be carefully examined. He writes: "Only Diego de Landa, in speaking of the Maya people, is more precise and tells us that 'they anointed a kind of brick-like soap, which was orna-

³ See also a similar comment by Coe (1961:105).

mented with pretty designs,' that is to say, he unites two points of great importance to know: that they employed a stone more or less in the form of a brick . . . and that this brick had traced on it a design of delicate work, which describes to us a stamp. 'With which'—continues Landa—'they anointed their breasts, arms and shoulders. . . .'" (34)

I am gravely suspicious of Alcina Franch's interpretation of the passage he partially quotes. The only way to dispose of the doubts which he raises is to quote the whole sentence in Landa:

They had the custom of anointing themselves with a certain red ointment like their husbands, and those who could afford it added to it a certain preparation of a gum, odoriferous and very sticky, which I think is liquid-amber, and which is called in their language *istahte*, and with this preparation they anointed a kind of brick-like soap, which was ornamented with pretty designs with which they anointed their breasts, arms and shoulders, and this left them beautiful and perfumed in their opinion, and the odor lasted many days without being lost, according to how good the anointing was. (126)

When the whole sentence is read several things become clear. For one, Bishop Landa is talking about an unguent or ointment which was smeared over the chest, back, and arms, not about designs painted or stamped on the body. For another, he does not mention the face or legs which are always included in any theory about sellos and body decoration. For a third, he is referring to a "brick-like soap" which certainly does not sound like a sello. He also speaks of a fragrant and sticky gum which surely was not a pigment—no one has yet put forward a theory that sello designs were fragrant! Finally, there is the problem that, according to my evidence, sellos were exceedingly scarce among the Yucatán cultures.

The point of recording the foregoing statements is not to denigrate their authors but rather to emphasize the fact that, except for Alcina Franch, whose conclusions I find unsatisfactory, no serious study of the meaning and use of sellos has been undertaken.

To these superficial comments on the use of sellos there has recently appeared a welcome exception. Laurette Séjourné (1966b:203-10) includes five pages of drawings of sellos found at Teotihuacán as well as several pages in which she records her thoughts on the meaning and use of these objects. Séjourné notes that numerous sellos were found in the course of the work on this site without the slightest clue as to their use. Written sources, she continues, give no data whatsoever on the sellos. However, one has to address oneself to certain published hypotheses about their use, namely, that they were used for facial and body decoration, or for stamping cloth or ceramics. Oddly enough, she points out, archaeological data give no support to such hypotheses.

The Spanish chroniclers of Pre-Hispanic life, the author says, commented on the elaborate painting of the body and face for religious ceremonies, but, for one thing, made no mention of the sello, and, for another, described a type of make-up—solid areas or broad horizontal and vertical bands—that is not found in sello designs. Neither can there be found among the innumerable personages who appear in the Teotihuacán frescoes, sculptures, or ceramics any with body or facial decoration which has any relation to sellos. Séjourné comments to the same effect respecting textiles. The problem of the use of

sellos on ceramics, she grants, is more difficult because of the frequent incidence of Teotihuacán stamped or molded pots. However, she adds, in examining a whole series of examples she has found none that reproduces a sello motif; in fact, they employ designs entirely distinct from those of sellos. Séjourné ends her discussion of sellos with a definite theory as to their use, and I shall return to this later.

At this point we need to examine in more detail the alleged uses of the sello which have already been mentioned.

Sellos and Body Decoration

The likeness of Pre-Hispanic man comes down to us in various forms: stone and stucco carving, painting, clay images, and written descriptions. If sellos were used principally or importantly for body decoration, all or some of these forms of human representation should give such evidence. I shall limit myself to a discussion of clay representations, partly because they form by far the largest numerical body of material for study, and partly because those who claim that sellos were used to decorate the human body rely on the clay images.

To begin, it is necessary to make an assumption that clay figurines faithfully depict the actual personages of Pre-Hispanic times, their habits of dress and undress, their ornaments—necklaces, ear plugs, arm bands, nose adornments, etc.—and their facial and body make-up. This is not a difficult assumption to accept, for what else than the people themselves as they actually looked and dressed, or exaggerations and distortions derived therefrom, could these figurines possibly depict?

One has only to look at any sample collection of figurines, from whatever region or culture, to realize that at least for ceremonial occasions both men and women were elaborately painted (Figs. 3-5, 7). A typical example shows a face painted with lines or circles or geometric forms around the eyes, on the forehead or cheeks, or along the bridge or sides of the nose, and a body with circles or scrolls around the breasts, and lines or solid blocks down the rib cage or thighs. These designs on the figurines are, of course, greatly reduced in size from those on the original human being with consequent distortion and loss of detail, but I do not believe that this affects my argument. Such painted decorations are distinct from the necklaces, bracelets, arm bands, or various articles of clothing also indicated by paint or by incision or by the application of clay fillets and buttons on the figurines. These adornments or accessories, incidentally, are very faithfully and realistically depicted.

Very rarely one finds a decoration that could have been applied to the original human being with a sello. To illustrate that sellos were used for body decoration Coe (1965:note 47) refers to a drawing by Román Piña Chan (1955:52) which shows a Tlatilco head with a footprint on either cheek (Fig. 4). Note, however, that all the other Piña Chan illustrations of Tlatilco figurines show designs which have no resemblance to sellos. Furthermore, even in the case of the face in question, the remainder of the decoration—three straight lines from the mouth to the chin and a crescent connecting the eyes over the bridge of the nose—plainly indicates hand painting.

Coe (1965:107) publishes a rear-view photograph of a superb Olmec figure in the possession of the Museum of Primitive Art in New York with what could be taken for a design made by a cylindrical sello rolled out once (Fig. 7). It was suggested to me, although not by Coe who makes no such claim in his book, that this might be the long-sought evidence of the use of a cylindrical roller sello. The design of the clay figure itself is incised, not made with a sello, but that does not rule out the possibility that the incised clay design represents a sello-made decoration on the original person.

A large cylindrical Olmec sello will roll out up to thirty-six centimeters. On the figure in question the design extends from shoulder level to the bottom of the seated haunch, and thirty-six centimeters comes close to the measurement of that part of the anatomy on a short-statured human being. The design on the clay figure runs down the back to the left of the spine. Just below the shoulder it passes over the depression where the back of the arm joins the shoulder. This depression is incised equally with that on the flatter part of the back. It would, however, have been impossible to roll a cylinder on a human back and make any impression, least of all an accurate one, on the back of the armpit. This particular figure, then, is not an example of the use of sellos for body decoration.

Other figures which show sello-type designs could be cited, but the incidence of such figures among the thousands which depict hand painting is so infinitesimal that at most we are dealing with the exception to the rule.

All that such examples as the footprinted face indicate is that a very, very few clay figurines have designs which could represent sello prints on a Pre-Hispanic personage. Moreover, there is no logical reason why sello-type designs could not have been hand-painted on human beings. In any case, from the evidence of painted clay figurines we get no positive clue as to the principal or even important use of sellos. At best we find evidence of an extremely exceptional use of them. No one who has asserted that sellos were used for body decoration, or has directly or by implication suggested it as a principal use, has documented his case. I strongly doubt that anyone could do so.

Later in this paper I shall attempt a description of the type of motifs and designs, forms and symbols, typically found among the sellos of several cultures. Included is an examination of some 300 from Tlatilco and 200 from Colima, cultures from which almost countless figurines are available. I cannot find more than an accidental resemblance (e.g., the foot motif) between the sello design and the facial and body decoration of the figurines.

That the form of the sello, in general, is not suited to stamping on human flesh is not necessarily important. The Pre-Hispanic people were deeply entrenched in traditions that often had magic or mythological origins. One cannot categorically say that they did not do something or did not use some tool simply because it did not work well. It must nevertheless be mentioned that, as a moment's "do-it-yourself" experiment will indicate, the great majority of sellos are unsuited for decorating the face or body. The exceptions are the very small, flat ones—two to four centimeters across—often depicting animals or a bird or a foot, which could conceivably have been used to stamp a cheek or forehead or arm.



Fig. 1 (top) Large stone sello from Veracruz. 16.5 x 44 x 11 cm.

Fig. 2 (bottom) Example of flatiron sello handle from El Chanal, Colima. 10.2 x 7.5 cm.

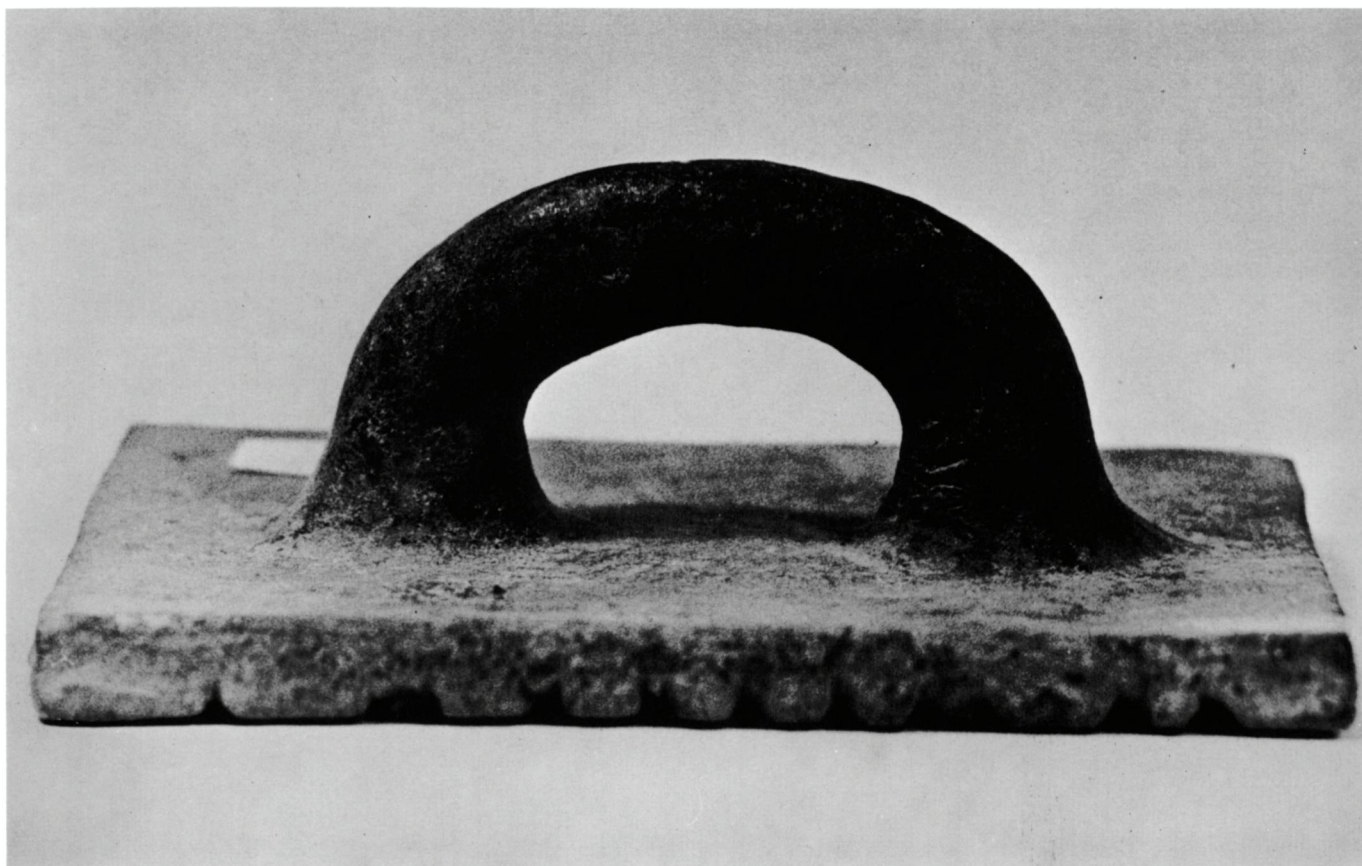




Fig. 3 Huastec effigy-vase illustrating facial and body decoration. (Courtesy of Mrs. Rose Covarrubias)

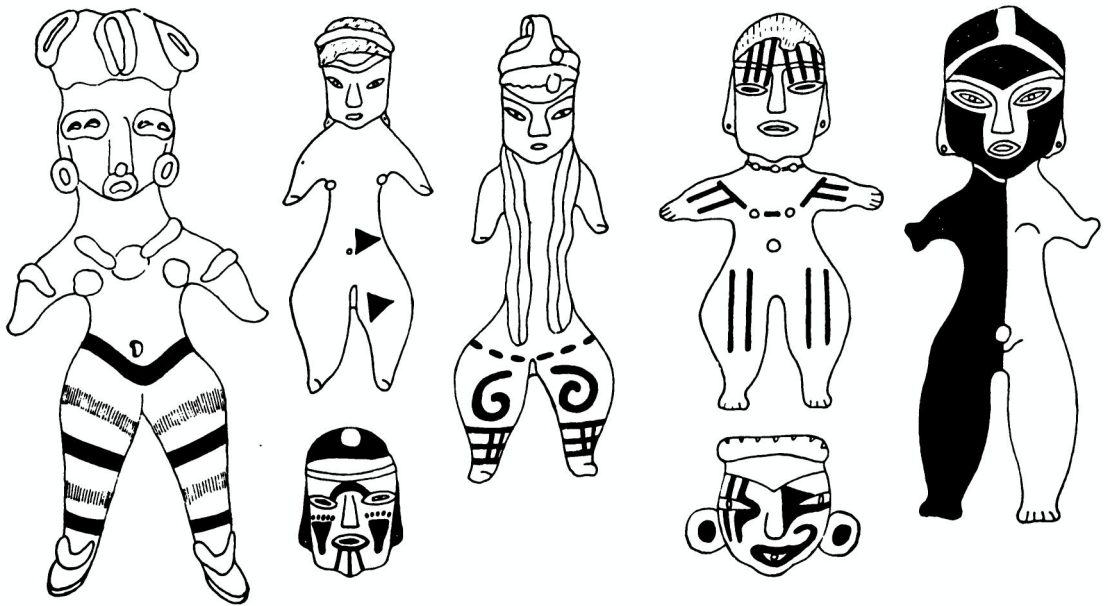


Fig. 4 Drawings illustrating facial and body decoration of Tlatilco figurines. Head at bottom, left, has footprinted cheeks. (After Piña Chan)



Fig. 5 (top) Nayarit figure illustrating facial decoration. (Private collection)

Fig. 6 (bottom) Concave sello from Guerrero. 7.9 x 2.7 cm.

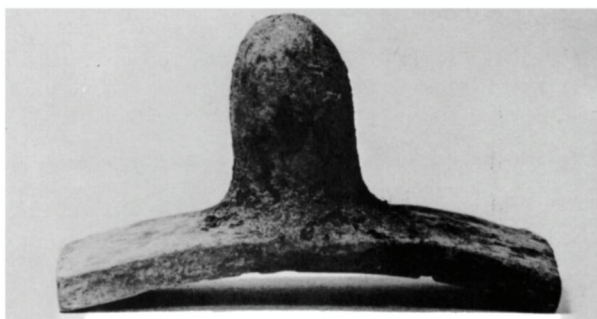




Fig. 7 Clay figure from Las Bocas. (Courtesy The Museum of Primitive Art)



Fig. 8 Veracruz bowl showing a design applied either by a mold or a sello.



Fig. 9 (left) Impression of a Cempoala, Veracruz, flat sello. 7 x 7.6 cm.



Fig. 10 (right) Impression of an Olmec flat sello, provenance unknown. 9 x 10 cm.

Fig. 11 Impression of a Veracruz cylinder sello, probably Late Pre-Classic. 8.4 x 11.6 cm. rolled.

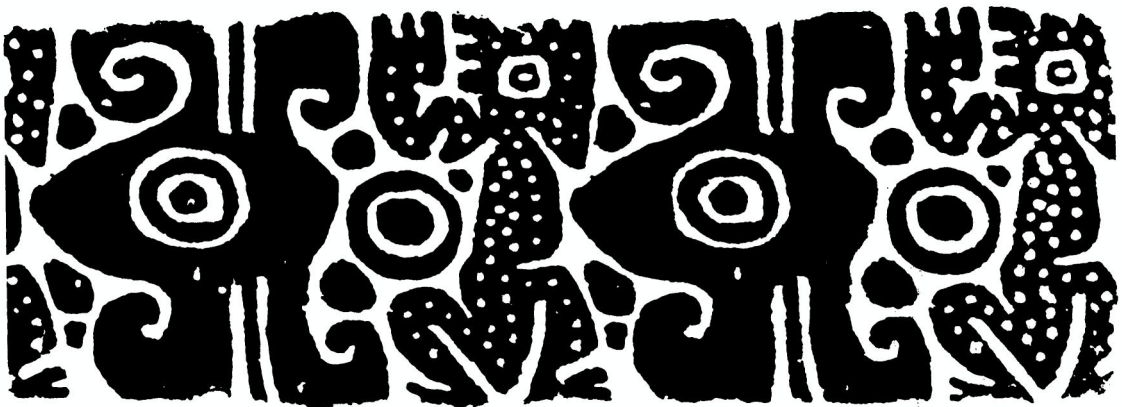




Fig. 12 Impression of a cylinder sello, probably from Chupícuaro. 6.2 x 10.8 cm. rolled.



Fig. 13 (left) Impression of a Huastec flat sello. 3.8 x 7 cm.

Fig. 14 (right) Impression of a West Coast flat sello, probably from Jalisco. 4.7 x 7.5 cm.

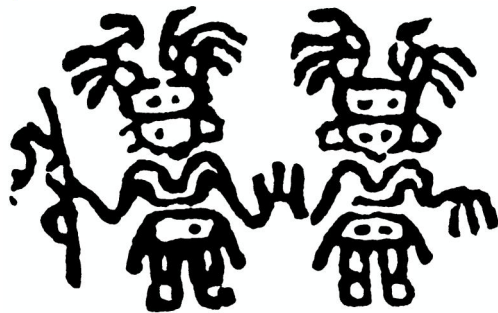
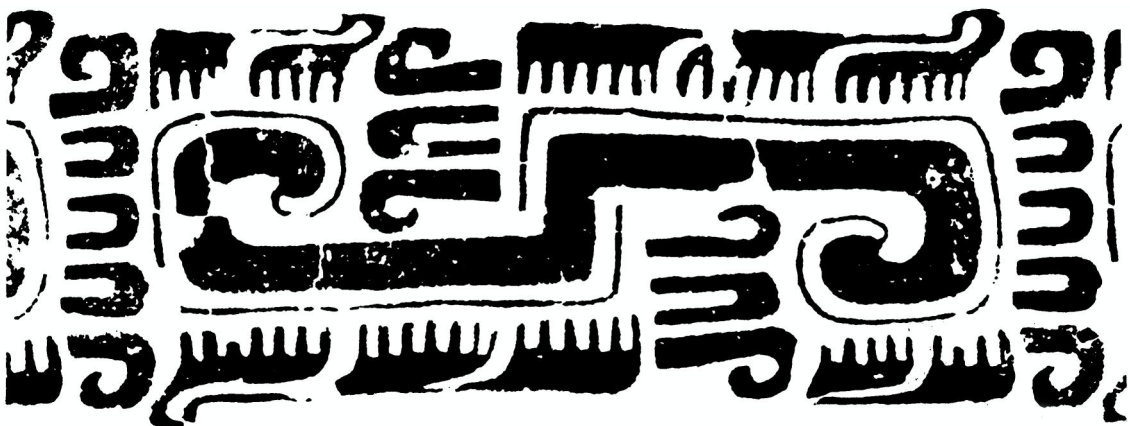


Fig. 15 Impression of a Remojadas cylinder sello. 8 x 21 cm. rolled.



It is often claimed that a slightly concave variation of the flat sello (Fig. 6), found in Guerrero, supports the conjecture that sellos were used for body stamping, because it more adequately fits the curve of the thigh or perhaps some other rounded part of the body. In consideration of this point it can be said, first, that the incidence of such concave sellos is very low; second, that according to my observations they are found exclusively among Post-Classic sellos; and, third, that we have no examples of clay figures whose thighs or rumps or what-have-you are so decorated.

To summarize this discussion of the sello and body decoration we may say: that body decoration was not a principal use of sellos; that it was not an important use; and that while sellos, especially the very small, flat ones, could have been so used, the evidence from the clay figures is not convincing. However, that slight evidence cannot be swept away. It leads one to suppose either that some sellos were stamped on the skin as a supplement to hand painting, or that once in a great while a decoration was painted on the face or body which closely resembled the design that a sello would have made.

Before turning to other possible uses of the sello, the reader is reminded that this treatment has not included an examination of other forms by which the likeness of the Pre-Hispanic personage has been brought down to us. Séjourné informs us that no facial or body decoration found on the paintings or sculptures of Teotihuacán relates to a sello design. I have not personally made a thorough search for such evidence in the other media, but nothing has ever come to my attention that would suggest sello-type designs in paintings or among the codices.

Sellos and Textiles

The existing fragmentary examples of Pre-Hispanic textiles in Mexico are so rare that they cannot be said to provide testimony one way or the other. The handful of examples known to the writer were definitely not stamped by sellos. There are a great many clay figurines depicting persons wearing miniskirts or rebosos or other kinds of apparel, and most of these show by incising or painting that the materials were elaborately decorated. The styles and designs of these textiles, as we see them in clay, strongly suggest that the originals were not stamped by sellos. From the evidence at hand it can be said that there is no proof, circumstantial or otherwise, that sellos were used to stamp fabrics and that the evidence we do have, direct in the case of preserved fragments, indirect in the case of clay, points exclusively to hand painting or weaving. The same comments apply to skins and leather goods.

Sellos and Pottery

I have a clay flute and a rounded bowl (Fig. 8), both from Veracruz, on which the design could have been stamped with a sello. The flute design spirals around the tube of the instrument and might have been made by one of those narrow, "border design"

sellos found in Veracruz, Michoacán, Colima, and Aztec areas. The bowl is decorated, rather unevenly, around its upper portion with twelve identical, round, flower-like patterns. If these two objects were not stamped by a sello they were stamped by a mold which produced the same design and the discussion therefore becomes semantic.

The confusion in these cases arises from the fact that in these two designs the positive and negative are interchangeable. Such confusion is rare; it is usually clear whether a design is positive or negative. If a positive design appears on pottery, and it almost always does, then we can be certain that it was stamped by a mold, not a sello. By definition, a sello design impressed into a soft surface such as clay produces a negative design, whereas a mold, negatively incised, produces a positive design. The distinction can be further clarified by comparing seals from Western Asia with Pre-Hispanic sellos from Mexico. The former, often cylindrical and made of stone, were fashioned for intaglio printing in which a positive impression comes out in low relief. The Mexican sello, in contrast, is made for relief printing in which the impression comes out embossed.

If there are sello-stamped pots, they are very rare. There are many which are molded and countless more hand-painted or incised. An example of mold-designed pottery, familiar to most collectors, is the beautiful bowl-shaped ceramic found near Matamoros, Puebla, which was fashioned upside down over a mold, the design therefore appearing on the inside bottom of the pot. Séjourné (1966a) discusses several mold-made types of vessels.

The design treatment of sellos and pottery is distinct. A direct comparison can usefully be made between Olmec painted and/or incised pots and Olmec sellos. A number of the same motifs are found on both: birds, claw scrolls, the claw-paw-hand motif, and the eye symbol. Several illustrations in Coe (1965) give evidence of similar themes, but different treatment. What is important to our present topic is that none of the vessels is sello-stamped. Olmec sellos were definitely not used to decorate pottery.

The conclusion is clear: pottery stamping was neither a principal nor an important use of sellos; and, while there may be a few examples of sello-stamped pottery, they are the exception.

The Lack of Basic Data

The Pre-Hispanic cultures made nothing that did not have meaning or use in the people's lives. What culture did or does? However trivial, the product of a culture is related to it in cultural terms. In the case of sellos we are clearly not faced with a triviality. They made them in abundance and the artistry of their making ran, as in all other utilitarian or art forms, from the excellent to the mediocre.

An extra word on the artistry of the sello is pertinent. Great artisanry, if not fine art, is required to complete a design on a cylinder with no gap or overlap. The accuracy of the cutting, the flow of the lines, the aesthetic of the total design indicate that artists of the first caliber were assigned to make them. The designs are often extraordinarily sophisticated, representing realistically or abstractly, and in every style between, religious, mytho-

logical, or every-day ideas and concepts, which connected Pre-Hispanic man with his environment, whether that of the celestial bodies which controlled his seasons, or the animals and fish which he needed so desperately in order to survive. Often the sellos are comparatively simple. The late cultures, however, tended to produce more rigid formalistic ones. In all cases they served a function, and from their quantity, their historical and geographical spread, as well as their artistry, it must have been an important one. But in what did their importance consist? For what were they made? How were they used?

These questions cannot be answered by mere speculation. The first task is to begin building up a corpus of descriptive material on the sellos: their shape, size, provenance, stratigraphic relation, date, design, and relation to other objects and to contemporary social customs and ideas. Certain questions can be answered only by the careful records of future excavations. Are sellos, for instance, found in all burials, in many, or in only a few? In what types of burials are they found, the richer or poorer ones? With what other type of material, figures, pots, or implements are they associated? We know that some sellos are found outside formal burials, in dump heaps or even occasionally in large urns in what might have been the ruins of a sello maker's shop. An examination of existing field-work notebooks may reveal some data along these lines, data in which the archaeologists were either not sufficiently interested or did not consider of sufficient importance to publish. I suggest that a search for and an analysis of such records, if any exist, would make a rewarding subject for some enterprising student looking for new fields to uncover.

A Beginning

On the shelves surrounding my desk are more than two-thousand sellos representing the major cultures and regions of Pre-Hispanic Mexico in which sellos were used. As they have accumulated over the years I have felt increasingly that they had something important to convey toward our understanding of those societies. The problem is to find the language in which they express themselves and then to learn the language so that the meaning can be conveyed. I trust that an examination of what is on these shelves will begin to open up communication between ourselves and these fascinating objects.

A careful look at a fairly large sampling of these sellos will perhaps permit us to establish a descriptive base from which certain leads may emerge. With this in mind, I propose to describe the Tlatilco, Las Bocas, Colima, and Guerrero groups. I shall not attempt a description of the entire collection. The purpose of this paper—to open up the whole subject of sellos—will be adequately served by an examination of the four cultures mentioned.

A passing word is nevertheless in order about those not further examined. One of the most remarkable groups is that from Remojadas, Veracruz (Fig. 15). These sellos, along with a small group, some 19, from Tabasco, are among the most difficult to interpret because of their abstraction. Stylistically and from the point of view of craftsmanship they are among the most exquisite. There are 194 sellos, mostly cylinders, from other Veracruz sites which, while retaining much of the abstract symbolism of the Remojadas group,

introduce fairly realistic animals in combination with abstract motifs (Fig. 11). The Post-Classic site of Cempoala, Veracruz, under Aztec influence, contributes another 171 sellos, all flat and most of them depicting animals (Fig. 9). There are 144 Huastec sellos from the region now represented by the confluence of the states of Veracruz, Tamaulipas, and San Luis Potosí, and these, quite apart from a distinguishing light-colored clay, exhibit a style which makes them easily recognizable (Fig. 13). A large group of 238 sellos is from Michoacán and another 97 represent Western Mexico in general (Figs. 12, 14). Finally, there are 47 sellos which I have identified simply as Olmec for lack of information as to their provenance (Fig. 10).

To return to the four cultures chosen for closer examination, Tlatilco is selected because of its position at the beginning of the time sequence and because of the pronounced Olmec influence to which its culture was subjected. Las Bocas, on the Puebla side of the great volcanoes in the altiplano of Mexico, has produced some of the finest examples of "pure" Olmec figures and pots that have so far come to light. A comparison between the Olmec sellos of that site and the Olmecoid sellos of Tlatilco is instructive. Colima sellos, of excellent workmanship, present sharp contrasts in style and design to the foregoing. This west-coast culture complex includes a large and distinctive selection of sellos from El Chanal under Post-Classic influence. The fourth group, also Post-Classic and over two thousand years later than Tlatilco, is from Guerrero. These sellos show no resemblance to the Tlatilco or Las Bocas groups, and show surprising differences from the sellos of El Chanal.

Tlatilco Sellos (*Figs. 16-31*)

I have examined 308 Tlatilco sellos. Of these 142 are hollow cylinders, 33 are of the rolling-pin variety, and 133 are flat. The great majority of Las Bocas sellos are hollow cylinders. Post-Classic sellos from El Chanal or Guerrero are all flat.

Of the Tlatilco flat sellos, 47 depict feet (Fig. 30); most of them outline a plain foot with or without simple to elaborate designs on the sole. The foot theme appears in one cylinder along with other motifs. The majority of Las Bocas foot sellos have the toes protruding or gripping so that the bottom surface is not entirely flat; there are a number of similar ones in the Tlatilco group. There is no representation of the foot among the Post-Classic sellos.

A considerable number of the Tlatilco cylinders depict birds and their plumage, and the eye, claw, and plumage symbols deriving therefrom; rabbits or hares; and rattlesnakes, including abstractions of the head and tail. The eye and claw abstractions in these particular sellos appear to derive from the bird rather than from the jaguar that is found so frequently among Tlatilco vases. Some of these depictions, especially those of rabbits, are naturalistic. They resemble the Las Bocas treatment of animals. Snakeskin patterns appear in the El Chanal group; I find only a single clearly discernible one in Tlatilco. Whereas disembodied parts of animals appear in Las Bocas, no such representation,

Fig. 16 (left) Impression of a Tlatilco cylinder sello showing a bird with typical treatment of plumage. 7.5 x 22.6 cm. rolled.



Fig. 17 (right) Impression of a Tlatilco cylinder sello showing a rabbit head with plumage scallop motif and scroll. 7.5 x 14.2 cm. rolled.



Fig. 18 (top) Impression of a Tlatilco cylinder sello showing simplified or abstract bird motifs. 8.7 x 26.5 cm. rolled.



Fig. 19 (center) Impression of a Tlatilco cylinder sello showing a bird with typical plumage as well as scroll and claw motifs. 6.5 x 18.5 cm. rolled.

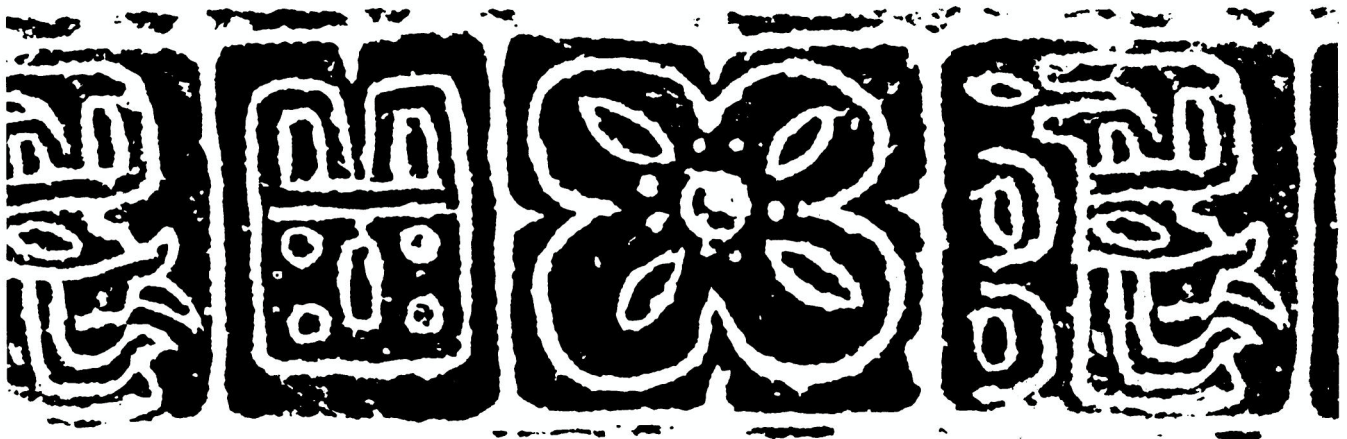


Fig. 20 (bottom) Impression of a Tlatilco cylinder sello cited to illustrate Pre-Maya writing. 8.2 x 21.2 cm. rolled.



Fig. 21 Impression of a Tlatilco cylinder sello showing a rabbit and a net or a trap. 7 x 16.3 cm. rolled.

Fig. 22 Impression of a Tlatilco cylinder sello showing a rabbit and some form of vegetation. 7 x 20.7 cm. rolled.



Fig. 23 Impression of a Tlatilco cylinder sello showing a foot with angular lines and net motif. 8.2 x 23.4 cm. rolled.

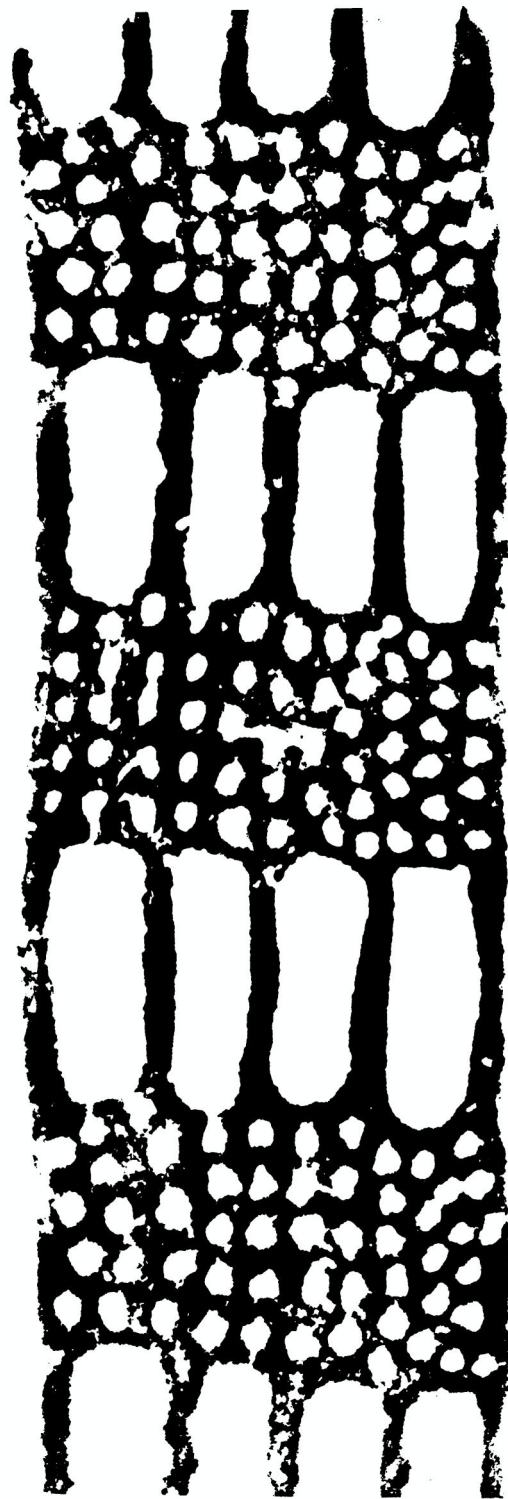
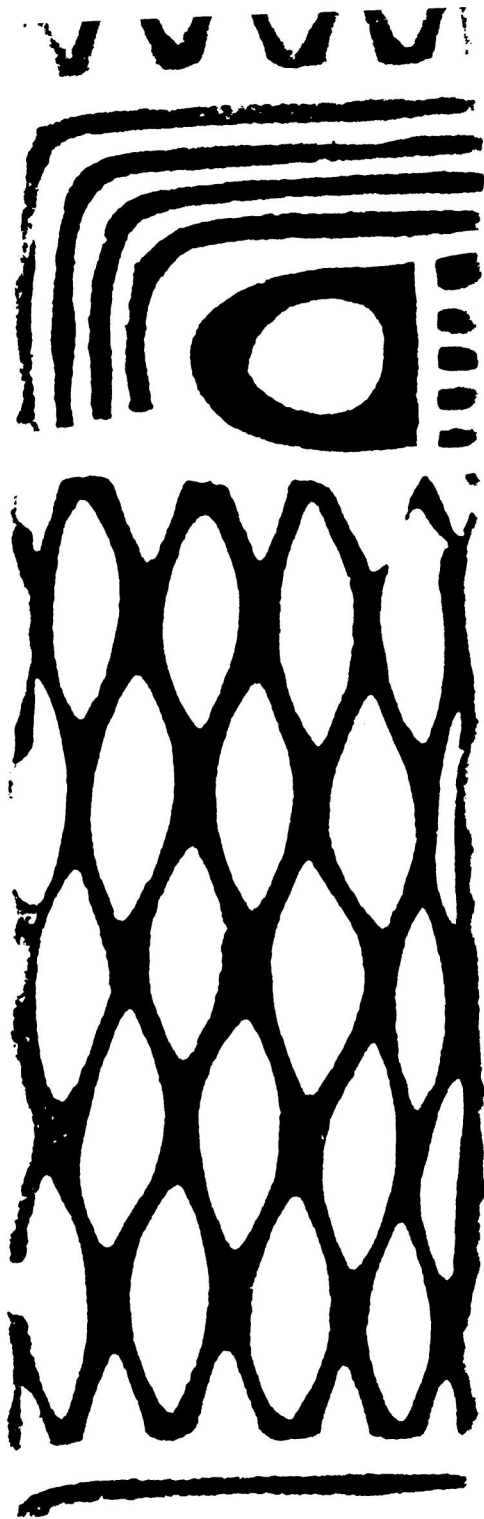


Fig. 24 Impression of a Tlatilco cylinder sello showing a net or a trap. 8.1 x 17 cm. rolled.

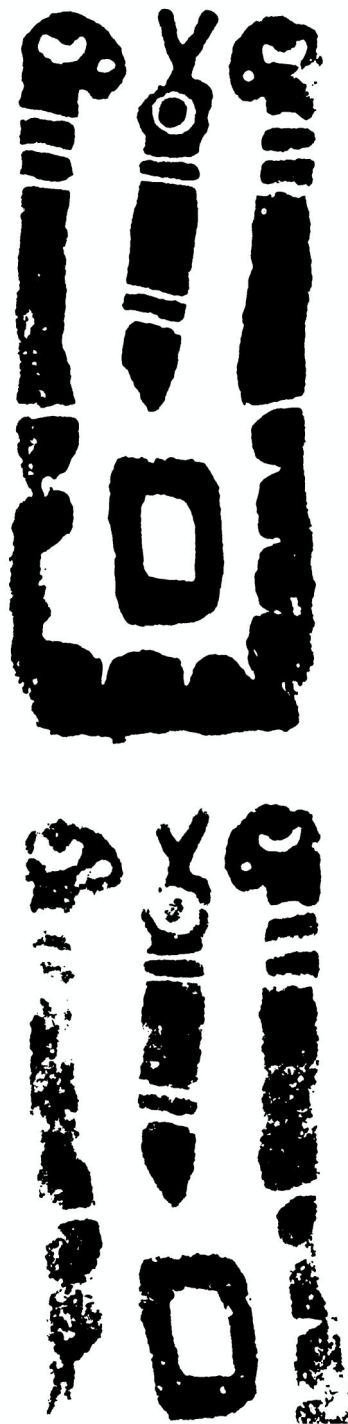
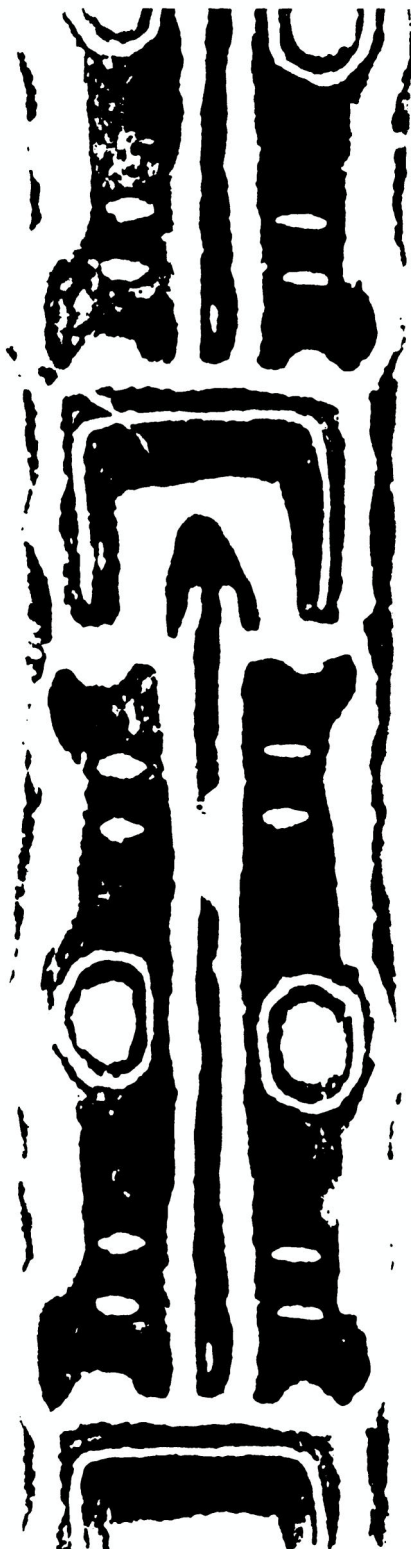


Fig. 25 (left) Impression of a Tlatilco cylinder sello showing a dart within an atlatl. 6.5 x 16.6 cm. rolled.

Fig. 26 (center, left) Impression of a Tlatilco rolling pin sello showing a rattlesnake, flanked by two apparently dead snakes, leaving an enclosure surrounded on three sides by scallops. 5 x 12.7 cm. rolled.



Fig. 27 (center) Impression of a Tlatilco cylinder sello depicting flowers. 5.7 x 16.6 cm. rolled.

Fig. 28 (center, right) Impression of a Tlatilco cylinder sello showing a rattlesnake entering a nest or a trap. 4.5 x 11.2 cm. rolled.

Fig. 29 (right) Impression of a Tlatilco cylinder sello showing a dart within an atlatl. 7.3 x 16 cm. rolled.



Fig. 30 (top) Tlatilco flat foot sellos. (Left) 6.7 x 4.4 cm; (center) 7.3 x 4.2 cm; (right) 6.7 x 4.5 cm.

Fig. 31 (center) Three Tlatilco flat sellos showing either Pre-Olmec influence or period of decadence. (Left) 5.6 x 5.7 cm; (center) 4.8 x 3.6 cm; (right) 5.1 x 3.6 cm.

Fig. 32 (bottom) Las Bocas flat sellos depicting feet. (Left) 3.5 x 2.8 cm; (center, left) 4.8 x 3.6 cm; (center, right) 1.8 x 1.9 cm; (right) 1.8 x 1.7 cm.

realistic as distinguished from symbolic, appears in the Tlatilco group. The rattlesnake is the only serpent depicted in Tlatilco. Numerous snake representations appear in the Guerrero group. Colima has a few serpent motifs and these, except for three non-El Chanal examples which could be worms, are always symbolic.

Important in the Tlatilco representation of animals are other motifs with which animals are associated; this also holds true for Las Bocas. To illustrate the point, a run-down of several Tlatilco animal and animal-related sellos is in order:

bird and plumage showing typical Tlatilco treatment of the latter (Fig. 16),

rabbit head associated with bird-plumage scroll as well as plumage scallop motif (Fig. 17),

abstract bird motifs (Fig. 18),

bird with similar plumage treatment to which a scroll motif and claw are added (Fig. 19),

rabbit and net or trap (Fig. 21),

rabbit and some form of vegetation (Fig. 22),

foot with angular lines on two sides and net motif on third (Fig. 23), net or trap (Fig. 24),

dart within atlatl which shows two finger holes for launching (Fig. 25),

rattlesnake flanked by two apparently dead snakes leaving an oblong enclosure surrounded on three sides by scallops (Fig. 26),

rattlesnake entering nest or trap (Fig. 28),

another depiction of dart and atlatl (Fig. 29).

The list could be extended: more spears, more atlatls, several net designs. We shall see that a number of Las Bocas sellos depict similar combinations of animals and the implements used in hunting them. Las Bocas sellos also have fish and fish in nets, a theme not represented in the Tlatilco group. Miguel Covarrubias (1957:36-7) illustrates a number of Tlatilco sellos, two of which are of interest in this context. One shows an animal on his back, mouth open and feet up; the other depicts what appear to be dead rabbits with darts pointing at them. Such combinations of motifs lead to the idea that there may be a relation between certain sellos and hunting and fishing expeditions. On the other hand, in the case of the net and fish, for instance, we may be dealing with symbols of water not necessarily connected with fishing.

Flowers and plants are depicted in the Tlatilco group (Fig. 27). There are some monstrous, cadaver-like figures; there are several crosses and a variety of treatments of a diamond-shaped form, one combined with the "lazy S"; the hand and/or claw theme is frequently found. One splendid Olmec cylinder (Fig. 20), divided vertically in three

parts with a different symbol on each, has been cited by José Luis Franco (1959:362) and David H. Kelley (1966:745) to illustrate articles concerning Pre-Maya writing.

It is important to note themes which appear in other sellos and which do not appear in the Tlatilco group. Dancing monkeys; chichahuastlis (wooden rattles in the form of a staff, an attribute of the gods); stepped frets; plumed, flint, feathered, or flowered serpents; butterflies; fish and marine animals; Tlalocs; personages or warriors, with or without masks; dogs, coyotes, and badgers; and depictions of a jaguar as such: none of these appear as Tlatilco motifs.

A considerable number of Tlatilco sellos defy my ability to describe, let alone interpret. They are cruder in design and execution than the others, and the clay is usually not well baked (Fig. 31). Many are filled with angles and curved lines—squiggles one might say—which appear to be aimless. There are several ways to explain the presence of these sellos. One is that they are not Olmec but pre-Olmec, a theory which implies that the Olmec improved upon an existing sello tradition, introducing their own symbols. Another possibility is that, contemporaneous with the Olmec presence, a peripheral group or groups adopted the Olmec sello tradition, and produced sello-like objects without having mastered the technique or the significance of these symbols of a superior culture. A third explanation is that this inferior group of sellos represents the decline and decadence of the Olmec tradition when symbols became relatively formless and meaningless, and execution careless. This is primarily a problem for the excavators, whose data must show whether these sellos are associated with Pre-Olmec figurines and pots, whether they are found principally in peripheral areas, or whether they are associated with the Post-Olmec or declining phase of the Tlatilco culture.

Las Bocas Sellos (Figs. 32-46)

The Las Bocas group is made up of 82 hollow cylinders, 13 rolling pins, and 14 flat sellos.

Of the flats, 5 represent feet; 4 of these depict the toes in a gripping position (Fig. 32). Among the cylinders, 6 represent animals or animal parts, and the depictions are more or less realistic; 6 represent fish; 7 have the net pattern; 6 show variations on the diamond-shaped symbol (Fig. 34); and 5 depict, *inter alia*, a solid circle within another circle (Fig. 33), the latter plain or adorned.

Also represented in the Las Bocas group are darts or spears and atlatls, bird footprints, a jaguar with glyph, scalloped bird plumage and tailfeather designs, one example of the chichahuastli, the L symbol within a square (Fig. 35), many examples of the sawtooth pattern, two examples of the “lazy S” and two of the Olmec cross, as well as flower and plant designs (Fig. 36). Both of the “lazy S’s” are on flat sellos and one (Fig. 37), especially, deserves detailed study, for, in addition to that symbol, found at the center, there are the cross, dismembered limbs, tassel-like forms, and other symbols.

A number of the above themes appear in the Tlatilco group: darts and atlatls, the net pattern, the diamond-shaped symbols, the bird-feather-and-tail design, the L-shaped symbol, the flower and plant designs. On a Tlatilco sello the L appears within a square



Fig. 33 (top) Three Las Bocas cylinder sellos showing a circle within a circle motif. (Left) 8.5 x 16.1 cm. rolled; (center) 6.7 x 16.6 cm. rolled; (right) 6.6 x 14.1 cm. rolled.



Fig. 34 (left) A Las Bocas cylinder sello with diamond-shaped motif. 5.8 x 14 cm. rolled.

Fig. 35 (bottom) Two Las Bocas cylinder sellos showing an L symbol within a rectangle. (Left) 6.1 x 18.4 cm. rolled, (right) 7 x 18.7 cm. rolled.

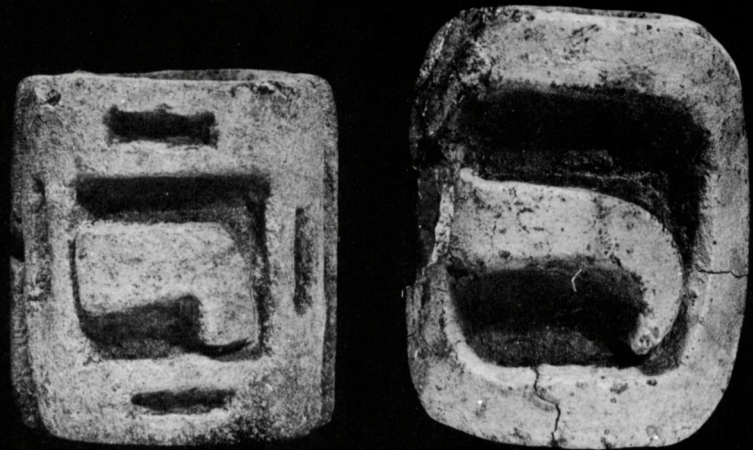




Fig. 36 (top) Impression of a Las Bocas cylinder sello depicting a flower pattern. 5.4 x 13.4 cm. rolled.

Fig. 37 A Las Bocas flat sello with "lazy S," Olmec cross, dismembered limbs, tassels, and other motifs. 9 x 7.2 cm.

Fig. 38 (right) Impression of a Las Bocas cylinder sello depicting a fish in a net. 5.7 x 15.4 cm. rolled.

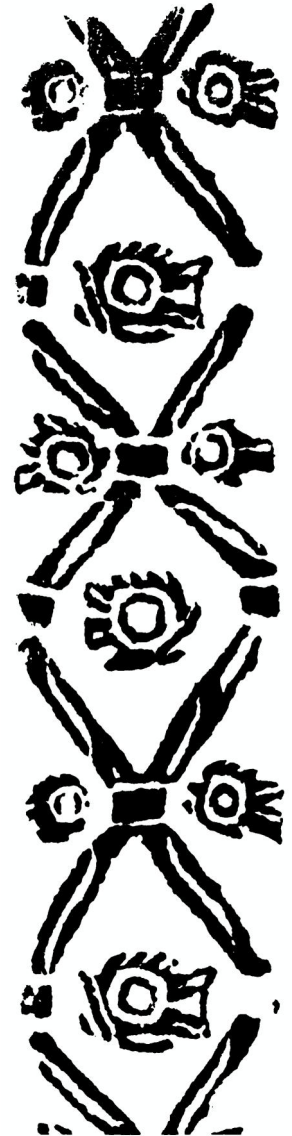




Fig. 39 Impression of a Las Bocas cylinder sello depicting one live animal, two live and two dead animal heads attached to a limb, and two possible snake tails with one rattle. 5.7 x 15.3 cm. rolled.



Fig. 40 Impression of a Las Bocas cylinder sello depicting two jaguar-like figures with a notched limb between them. 4.4 x 13.5 cm. rolled.

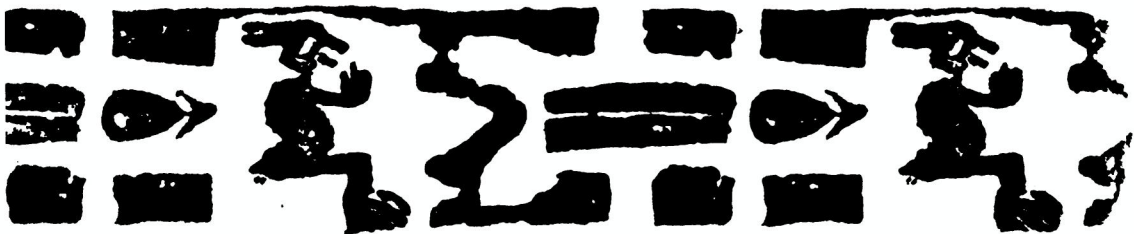


Fig. 41 Impression of a Las Bocas cylinder sello showing atlatl, launched dart, and rabbit-like animal. 5.3 x 15.1 cm. rolled.



Fig. 42 (left) A Las Bocas cylinder sello depicting strands and knots of a net. 8.4 x 17.1 cm. rolled.

Fig. 43 (bottom, left) Impression of sello in Fig. 42. 8.4 x 17.1 cm. rolled.

Fig. 44 (opposite, left) Impression of a Las Bocas cylinder sello depicting a monkey climbing. 6.3 x 15.5 cm. rolled.

Fig. 45 (opposite, right) Impression of a Las Bocas rolling pin sello depicting intertwined serpents. 7 x 19 cm. rolled.

Fig. 46 (bottom, right) Impression of a Las Bocas cylinder sello depicting shrimp (?) in a net. 8.2 x 12.9 cm. rolled.





on a cylinder, the other side of which depicts fingers; in other words, the L shape seems to be in the palm of the hand. The same L within a similar square appears twice in the Las Bocas group but without the finger motif.

I wish, also in the case of the Las Bocas group, to call attention to a number of cylinders depicting animals and associated objects:

fish in net (Fig. 38),

one live animal, two live and two dead animal heads attached to a limb,
and two possible depictions of snake tails with one rattle (Fig. 39),

two dead jaguar-like figures with notched limb between them (Fig. 40),

atlatl, launched dart, and rabbit-like animal (Fig. 41),

strands and knots of net (Figs. 42, 43),

monkey climbing between two trees or branches (Fig. 44),

intertwined serpents (Fig. 45),

shrimp (?) in net (Fig. 46).⁴

Here, as at Tlatilco, we have a series of sellos associated with hunting. In addition, Las Bocas sellos also refer to fishing. Sellos from other cultures or localities which might possibly have the same connotation are very rare. There are many representations of animals and birds and some of fish, but few in association with the implements of hunting or fishing.

Colima Sellos (Figs. 2, 47-53)

A distinguishing mark of sellos from the Post-Classic El Chanal site is the flatiron handle (Fig. 2), rarely found in other cultures. Out of the Colima group of 218 sellos, 102 have flatiron handles and can all be classified as El Chanal. There are in addition 19 very small sellos from El Chanal, which represent animals and have conventional handles. All of these sellos are flat.

Of the remaining 97 Colima sellos, 18 are cylinders and the others flat. The cylinders, unlike those of Tlatilco or Las Bocas, or for that matter of Remojadas, are either solid or have a hole so narrow that except in a few cases a stick cannot be inserted for the purpose of rolling them. In the six cases where the hole is somewhat larger it is still quite different from the conventional cylinder of the cultures just mentioned; the body of the cylinder is much thicker and the hole smaller. This is also a characteristic of Michoacán-Guanajuato (probably Chupícuaro) cylinders, the great majority of which are either solid or have narrow holes.

⁴ This motif is duplicated in a Remojadas sello. In both cases the object caught in the net has exactly the same form as one depicted along with other fish or mollusks in Codex Vaticanus B: 32.

The Colima sellos which are not from El Chanal represent among other things small animals difficult to identify, a crocodile, a coyote in profile with both eyes showing on one side (Fig. 47), three worms or serpents on circular sellos, the stylization of the flint or fire serpent carried to an even further extreme than in Guerrero, cultivated plants designed in a manner similar to that of Guerrero, and several flower patterns. Because of the lack of chronological data for Western Mexican cultures the dating of these non-El Chanal sellos is difficult. One sello with raised lines and buttons is reminiscent of a similar one from Tlatilco, and a few others have a Pre-Classic look. I think it is wise for the present to restrict the dating to the general notion that these Colima sellos are mostly earlier than those from the El Chanal site, and may go back several centuries, though some, as in the case of the flint-serpent motif, reveal a late influence.

In comparing Post-Classic El Chanal sellos to the Guerrero group, there are strong points of similarity but one's main impression is that of difference, doubtless due to the fact that, while fabricated in a Nahuatl tributary, they were made by artisans with their own indigenous traditions. None of the El Chanal sellos has the concave form so often found among the Guerrero group. All the Guerrero sellos have conventional handles; nearly all those from El Chanal, as already mentioned, have the flatiron variety. In contrast to the Olmec and Pre-Classic sellos of Tlatilco and Las Bocas, both Post-Classic sites reveal their own characteristic formality, rigidity, and stylization in the execution of motifs and in the motifs themselves. There is less freedom, less imagination, less uninhibited artistry in the later period.

Of the 121 El Chanal sellos, 19 represent small animals (Fig. 49); 11 represent masked and elaborately adorned gods or priests (Fig. 50); 10 depict butterfly motifs (Fig. 48); 16 show the "hocker" or crouching figure (Fig. 52)⁵; 36 use the repeated aquatic-bird-head pattern (Fig. 51)⁶; 5 consist of crisscross patterns associated with a serpent skin (Fig. 53); 3 have the V calendric symbol in the midst of a very elaborate pattern; and there are several variations of the greca, alone or in combination with other motifs.

The crouching figure and the aquatic-bird-head pattern are found in combination and each is also combined with an S design—the "lazy S" and/or crossed S's—as well as with scrolls and flower-like designs. The "lazy S," incidentally, is the only El Chanal symbol that can be compared directly with the Tlatilco and Las Bocas sello motifs, although its symbolic value may have changed by Post-Classic times.

The crouching figure of El Chanal is very similar to that found on 24 sellos of the Guerrero group. The aquatic-bird head, which is a principal motif in El Chanal, is a secondary one in Guerrero. The secondary motifs which accompany the Guerrero crouching figure are distinct: for instance, chicahuastlis and profiles of entire animals (Fig. 54).

⁵ Covarrubias (1954:34-40); see also Schuster (1951).

⁶ This may represent some animal other than an aquatic bird.



Fig. 47 (left) A Colima flat sello depicting a coyote. 5.3 x 9.9 cm.



Fig. 48 (right) An El Chanal flat sello showing a butterfly pattern. 7.2 x 10 cm.



Fig. 49 (bottom) El Chanal flat sellos representing animals. (Left) 2.5 x 3 cm.; (center, left) 2.2 x 2.6 cm.; (center, right) 2.4 x 2.4 cm.; (right) 2 x 2.3 cm.



Fig. 50 (left) An El Chanal flat sello representing an elaborately adorned priest. 7.5 x 5.4 cm.



Fig. 51 (right) An El Chanal flat sello showing repeat pattern of an aquatic bird-head. 10.6 x 5.3 cm.



Fig. 52 (above) An El Chanal flat sello depicting a crouching figure or "hocker." 9 x 3.4 cm.



Fig. 53 An El Chanal flat sello with snakeskin pattern. 6 x 10 cm.



Fig. 54 (right) A Guerrero flat sello depicting a crouching figure or "hocker." 5.9 x 7.9 cm.



Fig. 55 A Guerrero flat sello depicting a flint or fire serpent with spiraled greca. 10.4 x 3.7 cm.



Fig. 56 (left) A Guerrero flat sello depicting a fire serpent with chicahuastlis, two squared spirals, and three butterflies. 4.5 x 7.7 cm.



Fig. 57 (right) A Guerrero flat sello depicting dancing spider monkeys and chicahuastli. 4.9 x 8.2 cm.



Fig. 58 Three Guerrero flat sellos depicting various forms of greca. (Left) 5.3 x 8.9 cm; (center) 5.1 x 7.2 cm; (right) 5.6 x 7.9 cm.

Post-Classic Guerrero Sellos (*Figs. 54-58*)

I have already referred a number of times to the Guerrero sellos, but they should be briefly brought into the center of the discussion. There are 149 sellos in the group: 24 represent the "hocker" or crouching figure (Fig. 54); 41 represent various animals—plumed, flint, or fire serpents (Figs. 55, 56), birds, squirrels, badgers, some sort of small rodent, and some that can be described only as monsters; 29 are variations on the greca or stepped fret (Fig. 58); and 8, almost identical, depict intertwined scrolls surrounded by the U motif from which emerge what are probably two butterfly heads.

The Guerrero group of sellos is quite distinct from those of Tlatilco and Las Bocas. Post-Classic sellos have a uniformity of shape and general appearance, a stiffness or rigidity both in workmanship and subject matter which contrasts with the spontaneity, freedom, and imaginativeness of those of the earlier cultures. There is a marked conformity to formalized patterns. The late sellos, unlike those of the early cultures, are almost invariably bordered or framed, giving them a self-contained rather than an open-ended appearance. The essence has given way to conventionalism, the spirit has been smothered in formalism. If the Olmec sellos contained a magic to bring on the rains or to conjure the gods into assisting in the hunt, such inspiration has become pure routine in the Post-Classic.

The Search for the Meaning of Sellos

I must emphasize that the purpose of the foregoing pages is only to provide a descriptive base which may be a useful starter. It no more than hints at the qualitative and quantitative sort of analysis, together with spatial and temporal cross relations, which must follow in other studies.

Many of the symbols of Pre-Hispanic society found in other media are also found on sellos. The stepped fret is an obvious example, the Olmec cross another. The form as expressed on the sello may be different; I am inclined to think this is because of the different medium and quite possibly the different function of the sello. I should like to suggest that the decipherers of symbols, iconography, and hieroglyphs turn their attention to sellos, for sellos contain thousands of examples for study. Unfortunately, countless sellos have been discarded without notation.

A search must be made for the principal meaning and use of sellos. It is because of the lack of data that I reject the commonly accepted explanation of facial and body decoration, together with cloth and pot stamping. I suppose that some authority once stated that sellos were used for such purposes and that ever since, without giving the matter another thought, almost everyone has repeated it. Certainly it was not Sahagún or any of the other early chroniclers. I do not know where it started.

Sellos in Other Cultures

Seals were by no means limited to Pre-Hispanic Mexico; they have been made in different forms, of different materials, and for a variety of purposes in other parts of the world. Cylinders whose form and design are reminiscent of Remojadas and Chupicuaro types are found in Ecuador (Meggers 1966) but the same mystery surrounds their meaning and use. Sellos have been found in Costa Rica, dating as far back as the Late Classic, in sufficient quantity to suggest a local, independent tradition. A handful have been dug up in Peru, two of them, one flat⁷ and the other a cylinder, in a grave of about 1000 B.C. In certain areas of the Upper Amazon incised wooden objects are said to be in current use for facial decoration. Seals have been widely used since early times in the Far and Near East as marks of identification, personal property, and place, and as symbols of authority and legality. They seem sometimes to have imparted magical powers in ritual use. It is possible that there is something to be learned about the meaning and use of Pre-Hispanic sellos from the employment of such objects in other cultures.

Conjectures on the Use of Sellos

An early draft of this paper was sent to a dozen or so of the most knowledgeable people I could select, inviting the severest criticism. It contained a conjecture about the use of sellos for which I was courteously reprimanded. I suggested that sello designs were linked with the gods or the mysterious, uncontrollable forces of nature, and that sellos may have been used by the priests to convey to the people their magic and power as intermediaries with these forces. The grounds of the criticisms of this conjecture were sound: one cannot discard one undocumented hypothesis by presenting another one equally undocumented. The only acceptable approach is to build a body of data from which hypotheses or even, eventually, conclusions can be drawn. This is not to say that certain suggestions have not been made as to the meaning and use of sellos or that these do not deserve to be mentioned. We may not know how to sail the boat, but there is no reason why we cannot begin to look for the North Star.

Two writers have raised the possibility that a Pre-Maya form of writing appears in Tlatilco sellos, although they do not suggest that writing was a *raison d'être* of sellos. The idea may nevertheless have some bearing on our understanding of these objects even though it could at best involve only a very limited number of them. Franco (1959:361) writes: "The first and oldest representations that we know of Olmec writing are pure and simple line, executed with great sureness of outline, and they are of a *sui generis* elegance." The accompanying illustrations show (a) part of the text of the Tuxtla Statuette from San Andrés Tuxtla, Veracruz; (b) the text of Monument 13 of La Venta, Tabasco; and (c) glyphs of an Olmec sello found in Tlatilco and now in my collection (Fig. 20).

Kelley (1966:745), using the same Tlatilco sello as a secondary illustration, com-

⁷ Illustrated on p. 177 in *Art and Life in Old Peru: An Exhibition*. American Museum of Natural History. New York, 1962.

mented on another Tlatilco cylinder of three registers as follows: "All three registers clearly carry sequences of arbitrary symbols which are surely parts of a hitherto unknown writing system." When, along with the decipherment of such writing, we also have a fuller understanding of the meaning of the symbols and whatever other form of representation sellos may contain, we shall know much more about their significance and use.

As has been mentioned earlier, Laurette Séjourné (1966b:206), after remarking on the absence of any archaeological data on sellos and after rejecting the undocumented assumptions of many archaeologists regarding them, presents her own hypothesis as to how they were used. Through archaeology, she argues, we know that sellos were not used on any material of which traces remain. We must, therefore, suppose that they were used on material, such as paper, which has not been preserved and of which we have no samples.

Séjourné then analyzes the Pre-Hispanic words used for "sello" or "pintadera" and finds that they relate to paper, to scrivener or painter, to sign, mark, or token, or to writing something for someone or to someone. "It would appear," she says, "that, as in Europe, sellos served in ancient Mexico to stamp or to put a particular mark on documents of paper." Sahagún's ignorance of these objects, she feels, can be explained by their strictly personal and limited character, as well as by the brutal rupture of social relations resulting from the Conquest. She notes, finally, that according to her observations in Teotihuacán sellos did not usually form part of burial offerings. With the exception of three found associated with burials in the Zacuala palace all were found in refuse heaps.

A similar hypothesis was independently suggested to me by a collector primarily interested in Pre-Classic cultures, and among them especially the Olmec. Picturing Olmec society as made up of certain cultural centers along with a series of village colonies, like Tlatilco, he believes that a rather extensive commerce was maintained among them and that the traders, or intermediaries, carried marks of identity or authentication in the form of the design of a sello (not, of course, the sello itself). The sello design would have identified the place or person of origin. He also suggests that the sellos themselves may have marked the identity of important personages in the burial offerings that accompanied them.

I am not persuaded that the notion that sellos were used for personal or property identification is a useful one. It would presuppose that, as the cultures of Mesoamerica became more complex and sophisticated, as the importance of commerce increased, as the number of settlements became greater and their interconnection better established, and as the number of prominent personages grew, the sellos used to identify the latter or their property would also increase both as to variety of design in any one place, so as to identify an increasing number of local documents, and as to geographical differentiation, so as to distinguish one locality from another. The evidence points in the opposite direction, from extreme variety and freedom in the Pre-Classic to a formalization of style and design in the period preceding the Conquest. Looking at hundreds of sellos from, let us say, Tlatilco or Colima, I can see religious and mythological symbols, representations of everyday life, such as serpents, hunting and fishing, rain and lightning, but I cannot see anything that might be interpreted as private identification.

Nevertheless, there is no more proof for rejecting the notion of personal identification or that of commercial use than there is for advancing a different hypothesis. All hypotheses must be held in abeyance until we have a substantial body of data on which to work. Séjourné, for instance, records that nearly all the sellos found in her excavation were in refuse dumps. This is sharply at variance with what is known of their provenance in Tlatilco. Problems such as this bear on the meaning and use of these objects.

Nor can we discard the possibility not only of a multiple use of sellos but also of an historical shift in usage. Whatever role the sello played in the Pre-Classic Period may have been modified, if not changed, by the time of the Aztecs. The contrast, for example, between the Tlatilco and Guerrero groups discussed above, is so considerable that one is led to wonder whether the function of the sello was the same in both societies, or, assuming that the function remained similar, whether in the later period it had not become minimized or conventionalized. In the Post-Classic groups, for instance, there are no depictions that relate to hunting or fishing.

I have given some emphasis to the Pre-Classic sellos that appear to relate to hunting and fishing because it may have something to do with the early use of the sello. This idea has been suggested to me by one of the leading authorities on Tlatilco, Franz Feuchtwanger. The association of live, dead, and dismembered animals with darts or spears and atlats, and with nets and quite possibly with traps, and the further depiction of fish and other marine animals associated with nets suggest a ceremonial use of the sello in connection with hunting and fishing expeditions. The idea seems to me a profitable one to pursue. Perhaps other activities of daily life might also be found to be related to sellos.

The principal impression that hundreds upon hundreds of sellos have given me is that they are somehow associated with the magic, myth, and religion of the Pre-Hispanic societies. If so, their use must be connected with the religious leaders who formed the link between the people and their fearsome and dangerous environment. This is one of the reasons why it is very important to establish in what kind of tombs these sellos are found and to what other kinds of offering they are related. It is most likely that they were imprinted on *amate* or some other kind of paper, and we can never hope for a trace of that. I would not rule out the possibility that ceremonial designs were occasionally stamped on sand.

This paper will have missed its main objective if the foregoing is taken for anything more than it is intended. I hope it will encourage those who have already made excavations to reopen their notebooks to find material so far unrevealed and future excavators not to neglect the sello in their published reports. Several museums and private collectors possess sellos which might be subjected to further study and publication.

In our present state of ignorance not much more can be done until the specialists get to work on the material available. I find it urgent that work be done on this subject. There is no doubt in my mind that sellos constitute an invaluable source of information on the art, religion, and mythology of ancient Mexico.

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